

The Last Shot

FREDERICK PALMER

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SYNOPSIS.

At their home on the frontier between the Browns and Grays, Marta and her mother, entertaining Colonel Westerling of the Grays, see Captain Lanstron of the Browns injured by a fall in his aeroplane. Ten years later, Westerling, nominal vice but real chief of staff, re-enters South La Tia and meditates on war. Marta tells him of her teaching children the follies of war and martial patriotism, and begs him to prevent war while he is chief of staff. On the march with the 53d of the Browns, Westerling, an archer, is placed under arrest. Colonel Lanstron begs him off. Lanstron calls on Marta at her home. She tells Lanstron that she believes Feller, the gardener, to be a spy. Lanstron confesses it is true and shows her a telephone which Feller has concealed in a secret passage under the tower for use to benefit the Browns in war emergencies. Lanstron declares his love for Marta. Westerling and the Gray premier plan to use a trivial international affair to foment warlike patriotism in army and people and strike before declaring war. Partow, Brown chief of staff, and Lanstron, made vice, discuss the trouble, and the Brown defense. Partow reveals his plans to Lanstron. The Gray army crosses the border line and attacks. The Browns check them. Artillery, infantry, aeroplanes and dirigibles engage. Stranky, rising to make the anarchist speech of his life, draws the Gray artillery fire. Nicked by a shrapnel, splinter he goes to Berger and fights "all a man." Marta has her first glimpse of war in its modern, cold, scientific, murderous brutality. The Browns fall back to the Galland house. Stranky forages. Marta sees a night attack. The Grays attack in force. Feller leaves his secret telephone and goes back to his gun. Hand to hand fighting. The Browns fall back again. Marta asks Lanstron over the phone to appeal to Partow to stop the fighting. Vandellian in the Galland house. Westerling and his staff occupy the Galland house and he begins to woo Marta.

CHAPTER XIV—Continued.

The subjective enjoyment of the declaration kept him from any keen notice of the effect of his words. Lanny was right. It had been a war of deliberate conquest; a war to gratify personal ambition. All her life Marta would be able to live over again the feelings of this moment. It was as if she were frozen, all except brain and nerves, which were on fire, while the rigidity of ice kept her from springing from her chair in contempt and horror. But a purpose came on the wings of diabolical temptation which would pit the art of woman against the power of a man who set millions against millions in slaughter to gratify personal ambition. She was thankful that she was looking down as she spoke, for she could not bring herself to another compliment. Her throat was too chilled for that yet.

"The one way to end the feud between the two nations was a war that would mean permanent peace," he explained, seeing how quiet she was and realizing, with a recollection of her children's oath, that he had gone a little too far. He wanted to retain her admiration. It had become as precious to him as a new delicacy to Lucullus. "Yes, I understand," she managed to murmur; then she was able to look up. "It's all so immense!" she added. "Your ideas about war seem to be a great deal changed," he hinted casually.

"As I expressed them at the hotel, you mean?" she exclaimed. "That seems ages ago—ages!" The perplexity and indecision that, in a space of silence, brooded in the depths of her eyes came to the surface in wavering lights. "Yes, ages! ages!" The wavering lights grew dim with a kind of horror and she looked away fixedly at a given point.

He was conscious of a thrill; the thrill that always presaged victory for him. He realized her evident distress; he guessed that terrible pictures were moving before her vision.

"You see, I have been very much stirred up," she said half apologetically. "There are some questions I want to ask—quite practical, selfish questions. You might call them questions of property and mercy. The longer the war lasts the greater will be the loss of life and the misery?"

"Yes, for both sides; and the heavier the expense and the taxes."

"If you win, then we shall be under your flag and pay taxes to you?"

"Yes, naturally."

"The Browns do not increase in population; the Grays do rapidly. They are a great, powerful, civilized race. They stand for civilization!"

"Yes, facts and the world's opinion agree," he replied. Puzzled he might well be by this peculiar catechism. He could only continue to reply until he could see where she was leading.

"And your victory will mean a new frontier, a new order of international relations and a long peace, you think? Peace—a long peace?"

Was there ever a soldier who did not fight for peace? Was there ever a call for more army-corps or guns that was not made in the name of peace? He had his ready argument, spoken with the forcible conviction of an expert.

"This war was made for peace—the only kind of peace that there can be," he said. "My ambition, if any glory comes to me out of this war, is to have later generations say: 'He brought peace!'"

Though the premier, could he have heard this, might have smiled, even grinned, he would have understood Westerling's unconsciousness of inconsistency. The chief of staff had set himself a task in victory which had

no military connection. Without knowing why, he wanted to win ascendancy over her mind.

"The man of action!" exclaimed Marta, her eyes opening very wide, as they would let in the light when she heard something new that pleased her or gave food for thought. "The man of action, who thinks of an ideal as a thing not of words but as the end of action!"

"Exactly!" said Westerling, sensible of another of her gifts. She could get the essence of a thing in a few words. "When we have won and set another frontier, the power of our nation will be such in the world that the Browns can never afford to attack us," he went on. "Indeed, no two of the big nations of Europe can afford to make war without our consent. We shall be the arbiters of international dissensions. We shall command peace—yes, the peace of force, of fact! If it could be won in any other way I should not be here on this veranda in command of an army of invasion. That was my idea—for that I planned." He was making up for having over-shot himself in his confession that he had brought on the war as a final step for his ambition.

"You mean that you can gain peace by propaganda and education only when human nature has so changed that we can have law and order and houses are safe from burglary and pedestrians from pickpockets without policemen? Is that it?" she asked.

"Yes, yes! You have it! You have found the wheat in the chaff."

"Perhaps because I have been seeing something of human nature—the human nature of both the Browns and the Grays at war. I have seen the Browns throwing hand-grenades and the Grays in wanton disorder in our dining-room directly they were out of touch with their officers!" she said sadly, as one who hates to accept disillusionment but must in the face of logic.

Westerling made no reply except to nod, for a movement on her part preoccupied him. She leaned forward, as she had when she had told him he would become chief of staff, her hands clasped over her knee, her eyes burning with a question. It was the attitude of the prophecy. But with the prophecy she had been a little mystical; the fire in her eyes had precipitated an idea. Now it forged another question.

"And you think that you will win?" she asked. "You think that you will win?" she repeated with the slow emphasis which demands a careful answer.

The deliberateness of his reply was in keeping with her mood. He was detached; he was a referee.

"Yes, I know that we shall. Numbers make it so, though there be no choice of skill between the two sides."

His tone had the confidence of the flow of a mighty river in its destination on its way to the sea. There was nothing in it of prayer, of hope, of desperation, as there had been in Lanstron's "We shall win!" spoken to her in the arbor at their last interview. She drew forward slightly in her chair. Her eyes seemed much larger and nearer to him. They were sweeping him up and down as if she were seeing the slim figure of Lanstron in contrast to Westerling's sturdiness; as if she were measuring the might of the five millions behind him and the three millions behind Lanstron. She let go a half-whispered "Yes!" which seemed to reflect the conclusion gained from the power of his presence.

"Then my mother's and my own interests are with you—the interests of peace are with you!" she declared.

She did not appear to see the sudden, uncontrolled gleam of victory in his eyes. By this time it had become a habit for Westerling to wait silently for her to come out of her abstractions. To disturb one might make it unproductive.

"Then if I want to help the cause of peace I should help the Grays!"

The exclamation was more to herself than to him. He was silent. This girl in a veranda chair desiring to aid him and his five million bayonets and four thousand guns! Quixote and the windmills—but it was amazing; it was fine! The golden glow of the sunset was running in his veins in a paean of personal triumph. The profile turned ever so little. Now it was looking at the point where Dellarme had lain dying. Westerling noted the smile playing on the lips. It had the quality of a smile over a task completed—Dellarme's smile. She started; she was trembling all over in the resistance of some impulse—some impulse that gradually gained headway and at last broke its bonds.

"For I can help—I can help!" she cried out, turning to him in wild decision which seemed to plead for guidance. "It's so terrible—yet if it would hasten peace—I know much of the Browns' plan of defense! I know where they are strong in the first line and—and one place where they are weak there—and a place where they are weak in the main line!"

"You do!" Westerling exploded. The plans of the enemy! The plans that neither Bouchard's satiric cunning, nor bribes, nor spies could ascertain! It was like the bugle-call to the hunter. But he controlled himself. "Yes, yes!" He was thoughtful and guarded.

"Do you think it is right to tell?" Marta gasped half inarticulately.

"Right? Yes! To hasten the inevitable—to save lives!" declared Westerling with deliberate assurance.

"I—I want to see an end of the killing! I—!" She sprang to her feet as if about to break away tumultuously, but paused, away unsteadily, and passed her hand across her eyes.

"We intend a general attack on the first line of defense tonight!" he exclaimed, his supreme thought leaping into words.

"And you would want the information about the first line tonight if—it is to be of service?"

"Yes, to-night!"

Marta brought her hands together in a tight clasp. Her gaze fluttered for a minute over the tea-table. When she looked up her eyes were calm.

"It is a big thing, isn't it?" she said. "A thing not to be done in an impulse. I try never to do big things in an impulse. When I see that I am in danger of it I always say: 'Go by yourself and think for half an hour!' So I must now. In a little while I will let you know my decision."

Without further formality she started across the lawn to the terrace steps. Westerling watched her sharply, passing along the path of the second terrace, pacing slowly, head bent, until she was out of sight. Then he stood for a time getting a grip on his own emotions before he went into the house.

CHAPTER XV.

In Feller's Place.

What am I? What have I done? What am I about to do? shot as forked shadows over the hot lava-flow of Marta's impulse. The vitality that Westerling had felt by suggestion from a still profile rejoiced in a quickening of pace directly she was out of sight of the veranda. All the thinking she had done that afternoon had been in pictures; some saying, some cry, some, groan, or some smile went with every picture.

The sitting-room of the tower was empty to other eyes but not to hers. The lantern was in the corner at hand. After her hasty steps had carried her along the tunnel to the telephone, she set down the lantern and pressed the spring that opened the panel door. Another moment and she would be embarked on her great adventure in the finality of action. That little ear-piece became a specter of conscience. She drew back convulsively and her hands flew to her face; she was a rocking shadow in the thin, reddish light of the lantern.

Conscious mind had torn off the mask from subconscious mind, revealing



"I Want to See an End of the Killing."

ling the true nature of the change that war had wrought in her. She who had resented Feller's part—a what a part she had been playing! Every word, every shade of expression, every telling pause of abstraction after Westerling confessed that he had made war for his own ends had been subtly prompted by a purpose whose actuality terrified her.

Her hypocrisy, she realized, was as black as the wall of darkness beyond the lantern's gleam. This demoralization passed, as a nightmare passes, with Westerling's boast again in her ears.

When war's principles, enacted by men, were based on sinister trickery called strategy and tactics, should not women, using such weapons as they had, also fight for their homes? Marta's hands swept down from her eyes; she was on fire with resolution.

Forty miles away a bell in Lanstron's bedroom and at his desk rang simultaneously. At the time he and Partow were seated facing each other across a map on the table of the room where they worked together. No persuasion of the young vice-chief, no edict of the doctors, could make the old chief take exercise or shorten his hours.

"I know. I know myself!" he said.

"I know my duty. And you are learning, my boy, learning!"

Every day the flabby cheeks grew pastier and the pouches under the eyebrows heavier. But there was no dimming of the eagle flashes of the eyes, no weakening of the will. Last night Lanstron had turned as white as chalk when Partow staggered on rising from the table, the veins on his temples knotted blue whip-cords. Yet after a few hours' sleep he reappeared with firm step, fresh for the fray.

The paraphernalia around these two was the same as that around Westerling. Only the atmosphere of the staff was different. Each man was performing the part set for him. No man knew much of any other man's part. Partow alone knew all, and Lanstron was trying to grasp all and praying that Partow's old body should still feed his mind with energy. Lanstron was thinner and paler, a new and glittering intensity in his eyes.

When word of Feller's defection came, Lanstron realized for the first time by Partow's manner that the old chief of staff, with all his deprecation of the telephone scheme as chimerical, had grounded a hope on it.

"There was the chance that we might know—so vital to the defense—what they were going to do before and not after the attack," he said.

Yet the story of how Feller yielded to the temptation of the automatic had made the nostrils of the old war-horse quiver with a dramatic breath, and instead of the command of a battery of guns, which Lanstron had promised, the chief made it a battalion. He had drawn down his brows when he heard that Marta had asked that the wire be left intact; he had shot a shrewd, questioning glance at Lanstron and then beat a tattoo on the table and half grinned as he grumbled under his breath:

"She is afraid of being lonesome! No harm done!"

A week had passed since the Grays had taken the Galland house, and still no word from Marta. The ring of the bell brought Lanstron to his feet with a startled, boyish bound.

"Very springy, that tendon of Achilles!" muttered Partow. "And, my boy, take care, take care!" he called suddenly in his sonorous voice, as vast and billowy as his body.

It was Marta's voice and yet not Marta's, this voice that beat in nervous waves over the wire.

"Lanny—Yes, I, Lanny! You were right. Westerling planned to make war deliberately to satisfy his ambition. He told me so. The first general attack on the first line of defense is to-night. Westerling says so! She had to pause for breath. 'And, Lanny, I want to know some position of the Browns which is weak—not actually weak, maybe, but some position where the Grays expect terrible resistance and will not find it—where you will let them in!'"

"In the name of—Marta! Marta, what—?"

"I am going to fight for the Browns—for my home!"

In the sheer satisfaction of explaining herself to herself, of voicing her sentiments, she sent the pictures which had wrought the change moving across the screen before Lanstron's amazed vision. There was no room for interruption on his part, no question or need of one. The wire seemed to quiver with the militant tension of her spirit. It was Marta afame who was talking at the other end; not afame for him, but with a purpose that revealed all the latent strength of her personality and daring.

"I shall have to ask Partow. It's a pretty big thing."

"Yes—only that is not all my plan, my little plan. After they have taken the first line of defense—and they will get it, won't they?"

"Yes, we shall yield in the end, yield rather than suffer too great losses there that will weaken the defense on the main line."

"Then I want to know where it is that you want Westerling to attack on the main line, so that we can get him to attack there. That—that will help, won't it?"

"Yes."

"Of course, all the while I shall be getting news from him—when I have proved my loyalty and have his complete confidence—and I'll telephone it to you. I am sure I can get something worth while with you to direct me; don't you think so, Lanny? I'll hold the wire, Lanny. Ask Partow!" she concluded. Of the two she was the staidier.

"Well!" said Partow, looking up at the sound of Lanstron's step. Then he half raised himself from his chair at sight of a Lanstron with eyes in a daze of brilliancy; a Lanstron with his maimed hand twitching in an outstretched gesture; a Lanstron in the dilemma of being at the same time lover and chief of intelligence. Should he let her make the sacrifice of everything that he held to be sacred to a woman's delicacy? Should he not return to the telephone and tell her that he would not permit her to play such a part? Partow's voice cut in on his demoralization with the sharpness of a blade.

"Well, what, man, what?" he demanded. He feared that the girl might be dead. Anything that could upset Lanstron in this fashion struck a chord of sympathy and apprehension.

Lanstron advanced to the table, pressed his hands on the edge, and, now master of himself, began an account of Marta's offer. Partow's formless arms lay inert on the table, his soft, pudgy fingers outspread on the map and his bulk settled deep in the chair, while his eagle eyes were seeing through Lanstron, through a mountain range, into the eyes of a woman and a general on the veranda of an

enemy's headquarters. The plan meant giving, giving in the hope of receiving much in return. Would he get the return?

"A woman was the ideal one for the task we trusted to Feller," he mused. "A gentlewoman, big enough, adroit enough, with her soul in the work as no paid woman's could be! There seemed no such one in the world!"

"But to let her do it!" gasped Lanstron.

"It is her suggestion, not yours? She offers herself? She wants no persuasion?" Partow asked sharply.

"Entirely her suggestion," said Lanstron. "She offers herself for her country—for the cause for which our soldiers will give their lives by the thousands. It is a time of sacrifice."

Partow raised his arms. They were not formless as he brought them down with sledge-hammer force to the table. "Your tendon of Achilles? My boy, she is your sword-arm!" His sturdy forefinger ran along the line of iron



"I'm Going to Fight for the Browns—For My Home!"

ter under his eye with little staccato leaps. "Eh?" he chuckled significantly, finger poised.

"Let them up the Bordir road and on to redoubts 36 and 37, you mean?" asked Lanstron.

"You have it! The position looks important, but so well do we command it that it is not really vital. Yes, the Bordir road is her bait for Westerling!" Partow waved his hand as if the affair were settled.

"But," interjected Lanstron, "we have also to decide on the point of the main defense which she is to make. Westerling thinks is weak."

"Hm-m!" grumbled Partow. "That is not necessary to start with. We can give that to her later over the telephone, can't we, eh?"

"She asked for it now."

"Why?" demanded Partow with one of his shrewd, piercing looks.

"She did not say, but I can guess," explained Lanstron. "She must put all her cards on the table; she must tell Westerling all she knows at once. If she tells him piecemeal it might lead to the supposition that she still had some means of communication with the Browns."

"Of course, of course!" Partow spat the flat of his hand resoundingly on the map. "As I decided the first time I met her, she has a head, and when a woman has a head for that sort of thing there is no beating her. Well—" he was looking straight into Lanstron's eyes. "Well, I think we know the point where we could draw them in on the main line, eh?"

"Up the apron of the approach from the Engadri valley. We yield the advance redoubts on either side."

"Meanwhile, we have massed heavily behind the redoubt. We retake the advance redoubts in a counter-attack and—" Partow brought his fist into his palm with a smack.

"Yes, if we could do that! If we could get them to expend their attack there!" put in Lanstron very excitedly for him.

"We must! She shall help!" Partow was on his feet. He had reached across the table and seized Lanstron's shoulders in a powerful if flesh-padded grip. Then he turned Lanstron around toward the door of his bedroom and gave him a mighty slap of affection. "My boy, the brightest hope of victory we have is holding the wire for you. Tell her that a bearded old behemoth, who can kneel as gracefully as a rheumatic rhinoceros, is on both knees at her feet, kissing her hands and trying his best, in the name of mercy, to keep from breaking into verse of his own composition."

Back at the telephone, Lanstron, in the fervor of the cheer and the enthusiasm that had transported his chief, gave Marta Partow's message.

"You, Marta, are our brightest hope of victory!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Great Luck.

"Well, how did your camping trip turn out?"

"I had great luck about that camping trip."

"How was that?"

"I got sick at the last moment and couldn't go."—Louisville Courier-Journal.

Chas. E. George, Editor and Publisher of the "Bench and Bar Review," 825 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

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Its Ambition. "What is going up?" "Well, I suppose it's after the dough."

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Limits of Literature. "You've read 'The Heavenly Twins'?" asked the Englishman of an Irishman. "Yes, I have." "And 'The Sorrows of Satan'?" "Yes." "And you have read 'Looking Backward'?" "How the devil could I do that?" asked Pat.

At Last It's Reached. Father Vaughan tells a good story of a certain minister who was preaching on "Perfection." "Did you ever know anyone to be perfect?" he asked. "Did you ever read of any man or woman who was quite perfect?"

As he paused and looked around among his audience, a pale-faced woman rose up and said: "Yes, from all accounts, my husband's first wife was perfect."

No Wonder. "Do you think the world is getting better, Mr. Gadson?" "Surest thing you know! It's getting better every day." "In spite of the war?" "Oh, yes." "I'm surprised to find you so optimistic."

"You wouldn't be if you knew what I knew."

"And what is that?" "I've already cleaned up half a million in wheat and expect to make more."

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